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Corporations and the cost of living crisis: Corporate involvement in UK food charity

Hannah Lambie-Mumford[1] | Kelli Kennedy[2]

[1]Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

[2]Department of Health Sciences, University of York, York, UK

Correspondence
Hannah Lambie-Mumford, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK.
Email: h.lambie-mumford@sheffield.ac.uk

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Abstract

As a range of actors respond to poverty in the cost of living crisis, this paper addresses a long-standing blind spot in social policy analysis by examining the role that corporations are playing in voluntary responses in the UK. To do this the paper introduces theories of corporate power to extend approaches to researching mixed economies of welfare, which have traditionally looked at the role of commercial entities principally in terms of their role alongside other actors in the welfare state. Building on existing food charity research, which has explored the dynamics and implications of corporate-food charity relationships, this paper applies theories of corporate power to an analysis of the food charity related activities of the top 20 leading food retailers and casual dining brands in the UK. The analysis reveals how UK corporations exercised instrumental, structural and discursive forms of power to influence policy, set agendas and norms within food and charity systems and frame issues of food charity and hunger. The paper illustrates how a corporate power framework can add important layers to social policy analyses of mixed economies of welfare, by introducing a focus not just on operational aspects of corporate involvement, but also on the impact these corporations might be having on policy, how they are shaping the structure of welfare and the drivers of poverty through agenda setting in their markets, and the ways in which corporations influence public perceptions of social policy issues and how best to respond to them.

KEYWORDS
corporations, food banks, food charity, mixed economies of welfare, social policy, UK

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Cost-of-Living crisis is the latest in a series of economic events and trends, social policy reforms and global crises since 2010 to impact on the incomes of UK households and the services they can access. This has included public finance austerity following the 2008 financial crisis, the 2012 Welfare Reform Act which increased the conditionality of social security and reduced entitlement levels, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout these times of welfare restructuring and crisis, a range of actors beyond the state have stepped in to assist households, and voluntary welfare provision has been a key feature of this wider response. During the cost-of-living crisis, in the three months to November 2022, 71% of 671 charities surveyed reported that demand for their services had increased; rising to 93% for the charities in the sample classified as working on the relief or prevention of poverty (Pro Bono Economics and Nottingham Trent University, 2022). Charities providing support with food reported significant increases in provision between 2021 and 2022, including the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN, n.d.). The need for this kind of charitable support has been evidenced by the persistent levels of financial hardship since 2021, highlighting the insufficiencies of the ad hoc state funded payment schemes that were put in place including Cost of Living Payments and funding for local emergency crisis grants (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023; Ray-Chaudhuri et al., 2023).

A trend that has accompanied this growth in charitable provision aiming to help people meet basic needs is an increasing involvement of commercial actors, as donors and charity partners. For example, TSB Bank PLC's corporate volunteering programme with Citizen's Advice, and HSBC UK's work with the homeless foundation Shelter which has included donations and a multi-year partnership since 2023 to include training and technical support (Citizen's Advice, 2022; HSBC, 2021, 2023). In the cost-of-living crisis context, it is also notable that this trend includes companies that control access to the goods and services that have risen most in price. The role of energy companies in The Fuel Bank Foundation is a key example of this, with BP, National Grid, and Energy Networks partnering with the charity to provide fuel vouchers and advice for people struggling to afford domestic energy bills (2023).

Corporate involvement in charitable welfare has long been contentious. Research on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives has charted the evolution of the role of corporations in social programmes, and highlighted the inherent tensions when those corporations hold power over determinants of poverty and access to the necessities the charities are working to resolve (Brejning, 2012; Parkes et al., 2010; De Geer et al., 2009; Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019). This research has also observed how narratives presented by companies about their CSR work amplifies and normalises corporate interests in this charitable activity, and directly shape forms of welfare (Banerjee, 2008).

However, these relationships have not been explored in full through social policy analysis of mixed economies of welfare. Within the traditional mixed economies of welfare literature, private sector actors have been studied more in terms of a focus on their specific role alongside other actors (Powell, 2019). For example, the work of private sector contractors in delivering services such as employment training and privatisation in the NHS (Powell, 2019). To fully explore the nature of corporate-charity relationships, and their implications for social policy and practice, more theoretical and empirical research is needed into the nature of these corporate actors and the dynamics of their integration into different aspects of welfare provision and social policy. This paper argues that the case of food charities provides an important tool for filling this gap in wider social policy analysis. Building on existing food charity research, which has explored the dynamics and implications of corporate-food charity relationships, this paper applies theories of corporate power to an analysis of these relationships in the UK to provide a framework for exploring corporate involvement in charitable welfare as part of social policy analysis of mixed economies of welfare more generally.

There has been increasing involvement of food companies in food assistance in the UK and other countries over the last 20 years, and a growing field of international literature examining these relationships (Fisher, 2017; Kenny & Sage, 2023; Riches, 2018). As national food charity networks and organisations have grown (such as Feeding America, Food Banks Canada), partnerships between private companies and these national charities have become prominent (Classens & Martin, 2023; Spring et al., 2022). Corporate partners come from across the private sector including financial services, pharmaceuticals, utilities, logistics, manufacturing, agri-food and retail (Food Banks Canada, 2021; Kinoshita & Dollery, 2021; Feeding America, 2022). In the UK, research is less well developed, but clear trends are identifiable (Lambie-Mumford, 2017; Williams et al., 2016). Whilst there is a longer history of private sector involvement in ad hoc food charity provision (Caraher & Furey, 2022; Carstairs, 2017; Williams & May, 2022), research conducted in 2013 highlighted the increasing importance of relationships between key UK food charities Trussell Trust and FareShare and large retailers including Tesco and Sainsbury's (Lambie-Mumford, 2017). The COVID-19 response in the UK saw a further step change in levels of support for food charities from food corporations with around £50 million (in funding and/or food) donated by some of the biggest food retailers (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2020).

Food charity literature has provided key insights into the dynamics of corporate involvement in food charity, and theorised their consequences. Here, we frame this work within a typology of corporate power in order to advance this field and provide insights that could be applied to social policy analysis of corporate involvement in charitable welfare more generally. Corporate power can be understood in relation to an established power typology of instrumental power (to influence actors and outcomes), structural power (shaping options open to other actors) and discursive power (shaping of norms and ideas) (Fuchs, 2005). The work of Clapp and Scrinis (2016) highlights the ways in which the three forms of corporate power are manifest in practices used by multinational food corporations (food MNCs). Their instrumental power is evident in the ways in which these corporations shape the policy agenda through lobbying and other mechanisms such as Public and Private Partnerships (PPPs) (Clapp & Scrinis, 2016). In existing food charity research, this can be seen to manifest in examples of corporations lobbying in their interests for tax breaks through Good Samaritan clauses to distribute surplus through food charity (Fisher, 2017; Lohnes, 2021).

Food corporations' structural power is exercised through market dominance to set agendas and rules in the system (Clapp & Scrinis, 2016). For example, expanding and entrenching the distribution of surplus food through these charities, in order to avoid making systemic changes to reducing food waste at its origin point (Warshawsky, 2016). Previous research has also highlighted that involvement in food charity normalises this as a CSR practice, as opposed to making changes to rules in the market that would impact on the drivers of poverty and hunger including increasing wages and protecting food prices (Azadian et al., 2023; Fisher, 2017; Hamann et al., 2011; Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2016). The impact of these relationships on food charities has also been theorised in terms of the 'corporatization' of these charities; manifest not only in shifting to be corporate-friendly but observations around how charities adopt corporate-like operational, cultural, and functional models themselves—as a result of these partnerships (Lohnes, 2021; Poppendieck, 1998; Warshawsky, 2010). Finally, the discursive powers of food MNCs are put into practice through CSR reporting, media and outreach to frame issues and shape public perception (Clapp & Scrinis, 2016). This is evidenced in reporting, media and advertising work done by corporations that has been found to depoliticise and frame hunger as an issue for charity (Riches, 2011; Wells & Caraher, 2014).

Placing existing food charity research into this corporate power framework allows us to examine in more detail both how these forms of power are practiced in these relationships, but also how these practices in food charity work relate to the power these corporations hold in the wider global food economy. This paper applies the corporate power framework in an analysis of the food charity related activities of the top 20 leading food retailers and casual dining brands in the UK. In doing so, the paper adds empirical insight on the UK case for international food charity literature, building on previous UK research which has principally focused on charity case studies and a limited number or type of corporations (Lambie-Mumford, 2017; Williams et al., 2016). The paper moves on to discuss how this approach can shape future social policy analysis and enhance traditional mixed economies of welfare analyses by taking account of the ways in which corporations impact not just on the charities they support, but on the wider socio-economic and policy contexts in which those charities work.

2 | METHODS

The research involved a documentary analysis of sources relating to the food charity activity of the top 10 leading grocery stores and top 10 leading dining brands in the UK (Kantar Worldpanel, 2023; YouGov, 2023). The leading grocery stores included the dominant supermarket chains in the UK retail sector, and 'casual dining brands' included fast food and informal dining brands including pizza brands. These groups of food firms were selected to enable a systematic examination of the food charity work across the major UK supermarkets, and to explore this in relation to a different group of food companies which have not been studied in as much depth.

The companies included in the research were Aldi, Asda, Co-op, Iceland, Lidl, Morrisons, Ocado, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Waitrose, Burger King, Costa Coffee, Dominos, Greggs, KFC, Krispy Kreme, McDonalds, Pizza Express, Pizza Hut and Subway; Subway was excluded from evaluation due to lack of transparent and reliable data, meaning 19 corporations were studied in depth. Each of the corporations included in the research were dominant in their sector in the UK at the time of the research (Kantar Worldpanel, 2023, YouGov, 2023). Table 1 shows the grocery market share (Kantar Worldpanel, 2024) and operating profits from the data evaluated while Table 2 depicts popularity of the casual dining brands (as a replacement measure for market share, which was not available for this sector) and operating profits for casual dining brands.

57 documentary sources were collated for the analysis including the most recently released company annual reports, annual reports published by corporate foundations and annual reports of charities named by more than one corporation (FareShare, The Bread and Butter Thing and Trussell Trust). We gathered supplementary data for key activities that we identified in the reports including one report published at the end of Asda's "Fight Hunger, Create Change" programme and 37 press releases and webpages relating to Marcus Rashford's Child Food Poverty

TABLE 1 Supermarket market share and operating profits.

Supermarket	Grocery market share (12 weeks ending 12.06.2022) (Kantar Worldpanel, 2024)	Operating profit or closest stated equivalent in reports reviewed (year indicated)
Tesco	27.3%	£1815 m (2021) (Tesco Plc, 2021a, 2021b)
Sainsbury's	14.9%	£730 m underlying profit in retail (FY 2020/21) (J Sainsbury Plc, 2021)
Asda	13.7%	£210.6m (2020) (Asda Stores Limited, 2021)
Morrisons	9.6%	£254 m (FY 2020/21) (Wm Morrison Supermarkets, 2021a)
Aldi	9.0%	£287,714 m (2020) (Aldi Stores Limited, 2021)
Lidl	6.9%	£44,046 m profit before interest (FY 2020/21) (Lidl Great Britain Limited, 2021)
Co-op	6.2%	£5 m (2022) (Co-op, 2022a)
Waitrose	4.8%	£86,474 m (2022) (Waitrose Limited, 2022)
Iceland	2.3%	£111.3 m (FY 2020/21) (Iceland Food Limited, 2021)
Ocado	1.8%	£146 m (FY 2019/2020) (Ocado Retail Ltd, 2021)

TABLE 2 Casual dining brands' popularity and operating profits.

Casual dining brand	Popularity of brand (Q4 2023)	Operating profit or closest stated equivalent in reports reviewed (year indicated)
Greggs	74%	£236.5 m (2021) (Greggs plc, 2022)
KFC	64%	£50,743 m (2020) (Kentucky Fried Chicken (Great Britain) Limited, 2021)
McDonald's	61%	£32,079 m (2020) (McDonald's Restaurants Limited, 2021)
Burger King	59%	£11,696 m profit before tax (2021) (BKUK Group Limited, 2022)
Pizza Hut	57%	£6819 m (2020) (YUM!!! (UK) Limited, 2021)
Costa Coffee	55%	−£213,442 (2020) (Costa Limited, 2021)
Pizza Express	55%	−£438,959 (53-weeks ended 3 Jan 2021) (PizzaExpress Group Limited, 2021)
Dominio's	53%	£119.1 m underlying operating profit (2021) (Domino's Pizza Group plc, 2022)
Krispy Kreme	47%	−£3486 m (53 weeks ended 3 Jan 2021) (Krispy Kreme U.K. Limited, 2021)

Taskforce and its associated #EndChildFoodPoverty coalition and campaign. Data were collected between July 2022 and April 2023, covering a period of 2021 onwards depending on the data source. The analysis therefore provides insight into how these relationships were working coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic response and in the first one to two years of the cost-of-living crisis.

The reports and sources were analysed thematically. Key themes were identified before the analysis and covered: the format of the relationship (including outputs and outcomes); motivation and rationale; terminology and framing used to describe the activity; and charity partner details. The final sub-codes within these themes were developed inductively. The research team undertook a pilot analysis to refine the framework, and both researchers were involved in the analysis.

3 | FINDINGS

11 of the 20 companies were involved with food charity work. Of the supermarkets, these were Aldi, Asda, Co-op, Iceland, Lidl, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose; and casual dining brands were Greggs and McDonalds. Each of the most dominant supermarkets were involved in food charity-related work, including the 'big four' at the time of the research (Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda and Morrisons). These supermarkets held a combined total of 65.5% of the market in mid-2022 (Kantar Worldpanel, 2024). Financial statements included in the data also showed how company profits performed during and in the lead up to the cost-of-living crisis, with Aldi, Iceland, Ocado, and Tesco reporting profit increases (Aldi Stores Limited, 2021; Iceland Foods Limited, 2021; Ocado Retail Ltd, 2021; Tesco PLC, 2021b). However, Asda and Sainsbury's reported profit losses compared to the previous year (ASDA Stores Limited, 2021; J Sainsbury plc, 2021). Greggs and Burger King reported sales gains compared to their previous sales year while Costa, McDonald's, Krispy Kreme reported losses from their previous year (BKUK Group Limited, 2022; Costa Limited, 2021; Greggs plc, 2022; Krispy Kreme U.K. Limited, 2021; McDonald's Restaurants Limited, 2021). In the documents analysed, no corporation linked their own commercial practices to work on food insecurity. For example, their labour and workforce-related data including wage levels; or to their profits and price setting.

3.1 | Forms of food corporation involvement in food charity in the UK

The analysis revealed a variety of ways in which UK food companies were involved in food charity work, including through partnership working with food charities, direct organisation of food assistance, and campaigning activities. Asda's Fight Hunger Create Change programme was a £25 m partnership launched in 2018 for three years, working with Trussell Trust and FareShare and was the largest standalone investment we found in our dataset. It had a variety of components (funding, food donations and research) and was funded by the Walmart Foundation (Walmart owned Asda at the time) (Walmart Foundation, n.d.).

The Greggs Foundation was an example of a corporate foundation organising and/or supporting food assistance work directly (i.e., not through a separate charity) and it highlights the importance of examining the different ways in which corporations structure food charity-related activity. Through the Greggs Foundation, Gregg's provides food and funding for Greggs Breakfast Clubs, Greggs Outlet Shops, Community Holiday Club Programme and Hardship fund (Greggs, 2021; Greggs Foundation, 2022). In total the Foundation awarded £3.5 million for this work in 2021 (Greggs Foundation, 2022).

The analysis also found examples of companies becoming associated with political campaigning. The England and Manchester United football player Marcus Rashford led a campaign against child food poverty in 2020 (#EndChildFoodPoverty), originating in the problems associated with free school meal replacements during the COVID-19 school closures (poor standards of food boxes and lack of forthcoming commitment to providing support over school holidays) (#EndChildFoodPoverty, n.d.). Several companies in our sample engaged and supported the campaign including Aldi, Co-op, Iceland, McDonalds, Morrisons, Lidl, Sainsbury's and Tesco. Involvement took a range of forms, including food donations (McDonalds, 2020) and food parcel provision (Iceland Foods Limited, 2021), as well as Aldi selling a Marcus Rashford plush toy 'Radishford', with £10,000 of proceeds going to Magic Breakfast (Aldi, 2021).

3.2 | Practice of instrumental power

The analysis identified key ways in which these corporations were exercising different forms of power in practice in their food charity work. The End Child Food Poverty campaign provides an example of companies practicing instrumental power, working to shape policy agendas through lobbying and other mechanisms. In this case topping up state provision, and lobbying. As part of the campaign, Tesco, Co-op, Sainsbury's, Lidl and Iceland topped up Healthy Start food vouchers designed for pregnant women and young children, to be redeemed against fruit, vegetables, pulses and milk. Tesco and Co-op each topped up by £1 (originally £3.10 in 2020), Sainsbury's provided a £2 top up for fruit and vegetables, Lidl topped up by £1.15, and Iceland gave each customer with a Healthy Start voucher a free bag of frozen vegetables (Co-op, 2022b; Iceland Foods Limited, 2021; Lidl, 2021; Sainsbury's's, 2021; Tesco Plc, 2021a, Co-op, 2020, Lidl, 2020). The supermarket Morrisons also created Morrisons Kids Meal Packs which were funded as part of the Government's free school meals programme and distributed via schools (Morrisons, 2021).

In the autumn of 2020, the campaign led a parliamentary petition to end child food poverty, a writing campaign encouraging people to write to their MP, and lobbying for the government to implement key recommendations that were published in the National Food Strategy (#EndChildFoodPoverty, n.d.). The policy asks being first, extending the Holiday Activity and Food Programme in England to all children receiving free school meals, second to increase the Healthy Start voucher amount to £4.25, and third to expand free school meals to all under-16s in a household where a parent receives Universal Credit or a similar benefit (#EndChildFoodPoverty, n.d.). It is notable that this campaign focused on the provision of food (rather than income) and that policy asks covered in this campaigning did not relate to issues that would impact company interests, such as food prices or wage levels.

3.3 | Practice of structural power

Food corporations were exercising their structural power in food charity work by using their market dominance to set agendas and rules in the system through large scale donations and food charity capacity building. This included donations of funding and food (including surplus food redistribution), and the development of food charity infrastructure.

The 'big four' supermarkets (Asda, Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Tesco) all reported large scale initiatives involving several millions of pounds worth of donations, and/or meals worth of food. Tesco reported donating £60 m worth of meals in 2020 and £15 m of food donated both to FareShare and Trussell Trust (FareShare, 2021; Trussell Trust, 2021). Sainsbury's reported a £3 m donation to FareShare for pandemic support and in 2021 funded/supported distribution of over 23 m meals via 3945 unique charities (2021). Morrisons donated £10 m worth of food to 'restock Britain's food banks' in March 2020, with 2.1 m meals redistributed to FareShare as reported in 2021 (Wm Morrisons Supermarkets Plc, 2021a, 2021b). In the year of the reporting, Lidl and Ocado also donated funding (£4 m from Ocado in 2020) and/or meals worth of food (Lidl committing to 25 m meals over next 5 years, reported in 2019/2020 financial year) (Lidl, 2021; Ocado Retail Ltd, 2021). Findings relating to the dining brands revealed that Greggs has a long-standing commitment to supporting breakfast club provision and funds other initiatives through the Greggs Foundation (Greggs, 2021; Greggs Foundation, 2022) and McDonalds partnered with FareShare in October 2020 making a donation of 1 million meals (2021).

In the case of Asda's Fight Hunger Create Change programme, FareShare received support with infrastructure development and capacity building including 9 new warehouses, 27 new vans, 27 bigger chillers, 13 new freezers, 9 forklifts, and investment in volunteering, employability, and technology (FareShare, 2022). Asda also donated meals through its operations along the supply chain and from stores and depots, adding up to over 100 m meals donated (Asda, 2021b). Asda gave £5.7 m to Trussell Trust food banks to improve their accessibility, infrastructure (such as storage space) and services (including support services) (Asda, 2021b). The supermarket also installed year-round food bank collection trolleys with two annual drives run by Asda Community Champions (Asda, 2021a; Asda, 2021b).

Greggs provided an example of more direct involvement in the development of food assistance initiatives, drawing on its structural power to establish a long-standing provision of voluntary food assistance to children. Originally started by Greggs plc in 1999 as a community event, the Breakfast Club programme is now run through the Greggs Foundation, with 686 Breakfast Clubs (Greggs Foundation, 2022). 208 of the Breakfast Clubs are funded through customer donations via the Greggs Foundation, and 156 of the Breakfast Clubs are supported by Greggs employees via volunteering and fundraising at individual Greggs shops and distributions centres (Greggs, 2021, Greggs Foundation, 2022, Greggs plc, 2022).

Greggs have also used their structural power to roll out a new retail format with their 'Outlet Shops' selling discount Greggs products located in areas of social deprivation; there are currently 20 and an additional 30 are planned for 2025 (Greggs, 2021). The Outlets donate a portion of profits to the Greggs Foundation where it is ring fenced for grants for local community groups tackling food poverty and associated issues (Greggs, 2021; Greggs Foundation, 2022; Greggs plc, 2022).

We also found corporations embedding financial incentives for this work. For example, Morrisons, in their director's remuneration report statement, one board member had a personal performance summary to support their awarded bonus, which included facilitating the distribution of the £10 m of food to food banks (Wm Morrisons Supermarkets Plc, 2021a). At Greggs, food redistribution was a named bonus goal, with up to 5 per cent of bonus given for achieving targets, with 4.7 per cent awarded for that financial year (2022).

3.4 | Practice of discursive power

CSR reporting is a key mechanism through which corporations exercise their discursive power to frame issues and shape public perception. Our analysis revealed key examples of how companies were framing their food charity work in their corporate reports, including the framing of food charity work as key to responding to food insecurity:

> 'Many families have struggled to access affordable, healthy food throughout the pandemic. To help, we strengthened our partnerships with food banks to ensure that food was provided where there was greatest need.' Tesco Sustainability Report, P33 (Tesco plc, 2021a, p 33)

As well as linking surplus food redistribution through food charities to environmental aims and reducing food waste:

> 'We are committed to being the most sustainable grocer in the UK and to maintaining our industry-leading low levels of food waste (~0.4%). We work closely with food banks, social enterprises and other charities, including the local wildlife park to redistribute the groceries we can't sell.' Ocado Companies House Annual Report, P3 (Ocado Retail Ltd, 2021, p 3)

Through this discourse, companies frame food charity work as appropriate responses to hunger and as key processes for food waste reduction. This places emphasis away from policy responses that challenge corporate interests, for example compelling companies to pay higher wages and address food surplus at source.

Even where corporations discursively distance food charity from solutions to hunger, it is interesting to see how their discourse still prioritises this kind of response. For example, Asda outlines four steps to 'make a difference':

> '(1) alleviate symptoms of poverty; (2) get to the root causes; (3) divert surplus to those in need; and (4) create lasting change' (2021a, p62).

Importantly, seeking to 'get to the root causes' of poverty is not linked in this discourse to low wages or the cost of living, over which these corporations hold significant power.

4 | DISCUSSION

The findings reveal how different dimensions of corporate power are exercised through the food charity-related work of UK food companies. This systematic analysis of top UK retail and casual dining companies adds important empirical insight on the UK case, which to date has been more limited than in other country contexts. Using the corporate power framework to structure reflections on how these findings extend existing food charity research, this discussion explores the implications for social policy analysis more generally.

In exercising institutional power, the corporations in our sample were involved in campaigning through the End Child Food Poverty coalition. This campaigning activity emphasised policy changes that did not impact on economic structures or corporate interests such as labour market regulations related to pay, maintaining these within the discretion of companies. These findings extend existing research on food charity which has highlighted similar practices around corporate lobbying for policies providing tax incentives for corporations to distribute surplus through food charities rather than compelling the food industry to address food waste at a systemic level (Fisher, 2017; Lohnes, 2021). These findings highlight the need for social policy analysis on mixed economies of welfare to include the lobbying practices of corporations involved in charitable welfare. The case of food charity highlights how corporations involved in charitable provision are shaping policy agendas. In other types of social policy analyses it will be important to explore, for example, if and how energy companies partnering with fuel banks are involved in policy discussions around responding to fuel poverty and how this intersects – or not – with corporate interests.

The findings revealed many ways in which corporations were using their structural power to set agendas and rules within the food and food charity systems. Large scale financial and food donations increased food charity capacity and operations. This provides recent empirical evidence from the UK on how these relationships shape the nature and scale of the work charities do, and the kinds of services they can provide and in turn, impact on their prominence and place in welfare landscapes (Ellen et al., 2000; Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Riches, 2018). Importantly however, processes that expand and adapt provision in response to corporate investment could also increase the vulnerability and precarity of food charity systems with concerns, even from within the corporate sector, of food charities coming to rely on corporate philanthropic support such as surplus food (Food Ethics Council, 2021). The findings also highlight the ways in which corporate involvement in food charity embeds agendas of CSR, rather than a focus on changes to corporate practices that drive hunger and poverty. Workforce-related data highlights that 42% of supermarket workers in the UK earn below the real living wage (Living Wage Foundation, 2021) and in February 2023 25.8% of food sector workers were experiencing household food insecurity (Food Foundation, n.d.). The case of food corporation-food charity relationships highlights the need for social policy analysis of other types of charitable provision to explore the impact of corporate input on the structure of welfare and the precarity of charitable systems. At the same time, these analyses should consider the practices of these corporations that may be driving social policy problems such as poverty or ill health, including wages and working conditions, and the goods and services they provide.

Food corporations in the UK were exercising their discursive power through CSR reporting to frame issues of food charity as important responses to alleviating food insecurity. Our findings provide new data on some of the nuances surrounding this in the UK context, including how food charity is framed by different corporate actors; with some positioning this work as a key response to food poverty, and others caveating it as part of poverty alleviation and at the same time highlighting a need to address 'root causes' of poverty. It is important to note that even then, the role of corporations in driving some of these root causes is not part of this discourse. This framing of food charity in relation to poverty alleviation and vague references to future work needed to address root cause of poverty build perceptions that food charities are an appropriate response to hunger today, taking emphasis away from rights and social security-based responses (Cloke et al., 2017; Rock, 2006). This adds further evidence to food charity research which highlights that the effect of these discourses is to de-politicise the issue of hunger, by framing it as an issue for charity rather than the state (Azadian et al., 2023; Riches, 2011; Wells & Caraher, 2014). The findings also provide UK-related data on corporate discourses around surplus food redistribution and how this can frame food charity as a 'win-win' in terms of poverty alleviation and food waste reduction, adding to evidence from the US on this (Warshawsky, 2016). These findings have important implications for social policy analysis of mixed economies of welfare, highlighting the need to consider how corporate actors shape public perceptions around different kinds of responses to social policy issues, as well as the role of charitable provision for achieving aims in related policy areas.

5 | CONCLUSION

Theories of corporate power provide an important theoretical basis for expanding social policy analysis of mixed economies of welfare to explore not just horizontally (looking at the work of different actors across in parallel) but also vertically (to think about this activity in the context of wider structural dynamics). This framework prompts mixed economies of welfare analysis to look beyond the operational aspects of corporate involvement in charitable welfare. To look as well at how these actors in the welfare system impact on policy agendas (through their instrumental power), how they influence priorities and rules in systems which shape the structure of welfare and the drivers of poverty (through their structural power), and influence public perceptions of social policy issues and how best to respond to them (through their discursive power).

Crucially, this highlights that any involvement of an individual corporation in a particular charitable organisation sits within a wider context of power dynamics that reach across socio-economic and political dimensions and are important to include in social policy analysis. Through the case study of food corporation-food charity relationships in the UK, this paper has demonstrated how introducing theories of corporate power are important for enhancing mixed economies of welfare analysis on the role of commercial actors in charitable welfare. Future social policy analysis will also need to address more systematically the role of corporations in the drivers of poverty in the UK, and how policy responses can increase corporate accountability and action on addressing the causes that are rooted in their own practices.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request from the authors.

ORCID

Hannah Lambie-Mumford https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5731-3866

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